

## Essays in Philosophy

---

Volume 15

Issue 1 *Public Philosophy*

Article 7

---

January 2014

# The Value of Public Philosophy to Philosophers

Massimo Pigliucci

*Graduate Center & Lehman College, City University of New York*

Leonard Finkelman

*Lehman College, City University of New York*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>

---

### Recommended Citation

Pigliucci, Massimo and Finkelman, Leonard (2014) "The Value of Public Philosophy to Philosophers," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 7. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1491>

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/>

# The Value of Public Philosophy to Philosophers

**Massimo Pigliucci<sup>a</sup>**  
**Leonard Finkelman<sup>b</sup>**

Published online: 31 January 2014

© Massimo Pigliucci & Leonard Finkelman 2014

## Abstract

Philosophy has been a public endeavor since its origins in ancient Greece, India, and China. However, recent years have seen the development of a new type of public philosophy conducted by both academics and non-professionals. The new public philosophy manifests itself in a range of modalities, from the publication of magazines and books for the general public to a variety of initiatives that exploit the power and flexibility of social networks and new media. In this paper we examine the phenomenon of public philosophy in its several facets, and investigate whether and in what sense it is itself a mix of philosophical practice and teaching. We conclude with a number of suggestions to academic colleagues on why and how to foster further growth of public philosophy for the benefit of society at large and of the discipline itself.

## I. What is public philosophy?

The concept of “public philosophy” is at once very old and extremely recent. One can reasonably argue that philosophy has always been “public,” at least until the onset of the specialized professional academy in the 20th century. Socrates certainly thought of himself as a public philosopher, and so did pretty much all his fellow travelers from the ancient Greeks to the Early Moderns (Hume in particular comes to mind, but also Rousseau, Nietzsche, and many others).

But in the context of current discussions, “public philosophy” refers to a heterogeneous set of developments that have taken place over the past several years, broadly characterized by

---

<sup>a</sup> Graduate Center & Lehman College, City University of New York  
mpigliucci@gc.cuny.edu

<sup>b</sup> Lehman College, City University of New York  
lfinkelman@gc.cuny.edu

a conscious attempt on the part of (some) professional (usually, but not only, academic) philosophers to engage the public at large. As we shall see below, this engagement includes (but is not limited to) the production of series of books using popular culture as a vehicle to introduce people to philosophical thinking, the use of a number of social networks (Twitter, Facebook, Google+ and the like) to increase awareness of philosophical ideas, the publication of an increasing number of magazines of philosophy aimed at the general public, the organization of “meetups” and similar physical venues for discussing philosophy in public, and of course blogging, where faculty and graduate students reach an increasingly wide and sometimes surprisingly sophisticated audience to discuss timeless philosophical issues as well as the latest in a particular sub-field’s scholarship.

As with most issues in philosophy, these developments have bred controversy. Some academic philosophers may claim that public engagement activities distract from work more useful to the field. We argue that any such objections are misguided. Public philosophy is a valuable, indeed even vitally necessary, philosophical activity and should be pursued by professional philosophers for both practical and theoretical reasons.

In what follows we briefly discuss the debate between philosophers over the utility of public philosophy and put that debate in the context of broader concerns over the academy’s engagement with the public (section II). We survey a broad (though non-exhaustive) array of ways of doing public philosophy (section III), and then explore the question of whether these are ways of *doing* philosophy, ways of *teaching* the subject, or something else entirely (section IV). We do so from the particular standpoint of philosophers who have actually engaged directly in all of these manifestations of public philosophy. We conclude (section V) that public philosophy is at least as worthwhile a pursuit as other forms of philosophy and make some recommendations about how to further nurture its growth.

## II. Does philosophy need public engagement?

In a word: yes. The need for public philosophy is absolute and perhaps even dire, as we will argue below. Nevertheless, our view has been disputed by practitioners within philosophy, at least in part because of threats from outside the field. From the outside: non-philosophers disparage the study of philosophy generally, and so public philosophy with it. From the inside: a number of (fortunately, increasingly older) colleagues disparage engagement with the public as a waste of time, or an activity of “inferior” intellectual value — as opposed to writing yet another academic paper that will likely be read by a dozen people worldwide and cited maybe once or twice during its shelf life.

It is indubitable that philosophy these days suffers from a significant public relations problem. Politicians and university administrators routinely refer to philosophy as a “ridiculous” or, at best, useless, pursuit.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly (or perhaps not), some of the most vicious attacks on philosophy come from a closely allied discipline: science. It has been a matter of routine in recent years for prominent scientists, especially physicists, to somewhat unilaterally declare philosophy either useless or “dead.” To mention just two examples, Nobel physicist Steven Weinberg dedicated an entire chapter of his book, *Dreams of a Final Theory* to a rant against philosophy<sup>2</sup> in which he, ironically, used philosophical arguments to make his point. More recently, Stephen Hawking opened his recent book for the general public, *The Grand Design*, with an excoriating dismissal of philosophy, only to proceed — apparently blissfully unaware — to write a whole book about what is best characterized as philosophy of cosmology.<sup>3</sup>

There may be several explanations of this state of affairs. Broadly speaking, one may blame pervasive anti-intellectualism (particularly in American society), although one would expect that scientists should not suffer from this particular ill.<sup>4</sup> Another, more specific, cause may be the increasing commodification of academic teaching and scholarship.<sup>5</sup> In considering the utility of philosophical research, philosopher of science Philip Kitcher notes that philosophy does not seem to produce the same tangible effects attributed to (say) scientific research. Philosophers are embroiled in unresolved debates between internalist and externalist theories of epistemology, or over the grounds of metaphysical emergence; scientific research does not seem to be slowed by the philosophers’ lack of resolution, nor does it seem likely that the scientists’ work will be improved by settlement of the philosophical debates.<sup>6</sup> The effects on professional philosophy are clear: if a field is so demonstrably useless (and doesn’t bring in large research grants), then research institutions might as well stop encouraging its pursuit. Indeed, a number of universities have already closed their philosophy departments and others threaten to follow suit.<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not a pursuit is *useful* is, in part, an empirical question (after one has conceptually clarified what measure of utility one is interested in and why), and the data confirms that the study of philosophy is in fact useful. In particular, it is useful precisely by the commoditized metrics used to judge the success of academic programs: for example, statistically it is clear that philosophy majors can expect a higher-than-average entry-level income after graduation.<sup>8</sup> Anecdotally, no less a scientific authority than Albert Einstein thought that studying philosophy was crucial for success in science and encouraged his colleagues to pursue it.<sup>9</sup> Philosophy departments routinely share these facts through brochures and departmental websites in an effort to attract more students (and thereby stave off threats of department closure).<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, many non-philosophers continue to believe that philosophy is *a priori* a waste of time and resources. Their insistence may be indirectly encouraged by sources within philosophy itself. We can personally attest to the disdain that some of our colleagues have for any sort of public outreach: they argue that such efforts draw resources away from research that may advance the field. Kitcher notes that, since disciplinary progress often entails fragmentation and specialization, the sorts of questions that many philosophers qualify as “centrally” important are esoteric and uninteresting to the broader public; by contrast, philosophical questions of direct public interest are considered “peripheral” to professional philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, philosophy has tended towards insularity, and many of its practitioners see efforts to make it more accessible as antithetical to its progress.

Whether or not philosophy is demonstrably useful, there are professional philosophers who believe that it ought only to be useful for professional philosophers, or (less harshly) that professional philosophers ought only to engage the insular concerns of other professional philosophers. Public philosophy seems beside these points, if not wholly opposed to them. This is an evaluative question that is much more difficult to resolve than the empirical question of usefulness, and so the public relations problem persists.

It is somewhat ironic that perhaps the best lesson for how to get philosophy out of its current rut comes from science itself. It was not long ago that public advocacy of science was perceived by most practicing scientists — especially in the US — as at best an entirely secondary activity, pursued by colleagues who were just not good enough to do real science.<sup>12</sup> Things changed palpably in the early 1990s, when the Republican “revolutionaries” in Congress, headed by then Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, began making rumors to the effect that they were going to cut science funding, especially in “sensitive” areas, such as evolutionary biology and cosmology (because notions like evolution and the Big Bang went contrary to the religious fundamentalism of many of their constituents). Suddenly, pretty much every American professional science society, including the National Academy of Sciences, found it crucial to engage in public outreach efforts. It is now easy to find prominent scientists who write for the public without suffering any ill effect to their academic careers. Public science festivals and other outreach events (including the increasingly popular “Darwin Day” annual occurrence) are the order of the day.

That is precisely the sort of thing that needs to happen in philosophy — and which to some extent is in fact happening as a result of public philosophy. The difficulties for our field, however, are larger than those encountered by scientists: after all, the problem for scientists was almost exclusively internally generated, an issue of convincing practitioners of various

scientific disciplines to engage and recognize the value of public outreach. While much specialized academic philosophy is indeed “useless” (to the broader public), this is true of *any* specialized academic field, including the sciences. It would be just as difficult for a philosopher to explain why one more commentary on Kant is good for society as it would be for a biologist to explain why one more study on the sexual habits of an obscure species of moth would be valuable to life on main street. But that is not what needs to be done, and again the model of science can be usefully adopted by other disciplines. A great part of the value of science for the general public lies in the curiosity it nurtures about the natural world, in its respect for fact-based theorizing, and in the occasional applications with societal impact that arise from basic scientific research. Philosophers have failed to remind people of analogous benefits stemming from their own discipline: respect for critical thinking, dialogue and diversity of opinion, sharpening of one’s own reasoning tools, and a number of contributions to society ranging from the invention of logic to the articulation of the principles of democracy.<sup>13</sup>

But of course science per se already enjoyed an enormous social cachet. Not so philosophy, where the battle — as we have argued — needs to be fought on both the internal front (professional philosophers who discourage talking to the public) and the external one (the general perception in society of philosophy as the epitome of useless pursuits). Nevertheless, success in battles on the external front depends at least in part on winning on the internal one, and so that will be our focus here. The first step is to recognize that philosophy has a public image problem and it behooves the profession to look seriously in how to address it. We now turn to some of the possibilities offered by public philosophy as it has established itself over the past several years. These forms of outreach are ultimately as valuable to the field as less-controversially beneficial professional activities, as we will show, and this in turn demonstrates why professional philosophers ought to value and engage in public outreach.

### **III. The (many) ways of public philosophy**

There are a number of ways to practice public philosophy. We have had the opportunity to engage in most if not all of them, so that we can write from personal experience. What follows is a brief description of the various modalities, with their pros and cons, as a contribution to the taxonomy of public philosophy, as well as to discussions about the efficacy of its various forms.

Perhaps the most traditional way of doing public outreach from within any academic discipline is through magazines and books written for the general public. However, until not

so long ago it was hard to imagine any philosophical equivalent of *Scientific American* or even *Discover* magazine, and pretty much the only thing a layperson interested in philosophy could find in bookstores was yet another “History of Western Philosophy.”<sup>14</sup> The situation has recently changed significantly in both respects.

There is now a good number of philosophy magazines aimed at laypeople, including but not limited to: *Philosophy Now* (est. 1991), *The Philosophers’ Magazine* (est. 1997), *Think* magazine (est. 2002), *Cogito* (est. 2004), *New Philosopher* (est. 2013), and several others. The articles in these publications tend to be short, cover a wide range of topics, and are often (but not always) written by professional philosophers. The language is non-technical, and the quality of the entries varies from publication to publication and even within the same issue of a given magazine — just as in the case of the science equivalents of these outlets, such as *Discover* or *Scientific American*.

In terms of books publishing, several houses have hit on the idea of exploiting elements of popular culture to introduce new audiences to philosophizing. These include Blackwell’s “And Philosophy” series, Open Court’s “Popular Culture and Philosophy” list, and the University of Kentucky Press’ “Philosophy of Pop Culture” entries. Typically, professional philosophers write the chapters in these books, and they range in levels of depth from collection to collection (and, like the magazines, even within a single offering). The editors of these series generally do a good job at picking topics that resonate with a broad audience, and yet lend themselves as a vehicle to introduce readers to serious philosophical issues. Our own entries in these anthologies alternately reflect the academic’s dual role as teacher and as researcher: essays such as “Sherlock’s Reasoning Toolbox”<sup>15</sup> and “All for One and One for All: Mogo, the Collective, and Biological Unity”<sup>16</sup> are written to explain philosophical concepts whereas “The Limits of Scientism Sheldon Cooper Style”<sup>17</sup> and “Man and Superman: What a Kryptonian Can Teach Us About Human Nature”<sup>18</sup> present original philosophical arguments.

A second broad category of public philosophy is the philosophy cafe and similar initiatives. These can take a variety of forms, from so-called Socrates Cafes to “Meetup” groups. The basic idea is to gather interested people in a public social setting (a coffee house, public library, restaurant, etc.) to discuss philosophical topics with the aid of a facilitator. The topic may be set in advance by the facilitator, or even decided on the spur of the moment by consulting the gathered participants. The quality of these interactions, again, varies as a function of both the abilities of the facilitator and the background, interests and personalities of the attendees. Our own experience with a Meetup group in New York City has been more than gratifying. The group was established in 2007, has met a total of 151 times as of this

writing, and counts a whopping 1,438 members. These numbers should go a long way towards undermining the belief that it is difficult to interest laypeople in philosophy.

Next in our short tour of how to do public philosophy we move from concrete physical experiences to virtual ones, particularly blogs and social networks. The “blog” (a contraction of “web log”) is a phenomenon that emerged in the late 1990s and has since exploded all over the internet. As a further development, since about 2009 there has been a significant increase in the number of blogs hosting several authors. At a rough count in early 2011 there were about 156 million public blogs in the world. In philosophy, David Chalmers hosts a list of disciplinary blogs organized by general topic. According to BioMetrics, the top philosophy blog is hosted by Brian Leiter from the University of Chicago. One of us (Pigliucci) has been hosting the *RationallySpeaking.org* blog — devoted mostly to science and philosophy — since 2005. To date, the blog has published 1,151 entries, has received a total of 32,649 comments, and has been visited 3,281,600 times. Blogging is a fascinating experience, which gives professional academics (not just in philosophy: science blogs are numerous and highly popular) a very different experience from that of the classroom. While the quality of comments posted by readers varies tremendously (especially if the blog host does not moderate incoming comments; host moderation is definitely encouraged), good blogs build quality readership over time, and some readers can seriously and knowledgeably challenge the blog writers even on somewhat technical issues.

Finally, public philosophy may be done on social networks like Facebook, Google+, Twitter and a number of others. The kinds of interaction, as well as the best way to utilize these platforms, varies depending on some of the same factors briefly mentioned for blogging, but also because of the specific features of a given social networking platform. For instance, again writing from personal experience, Google+ and Facebook allow prolonged, somewhat in-depth dialogues with one’s “followers,” while Twitter is best used for rapid, shorter communications (such as pointing one’s followers to select internet resources) rather than for actual discussions. At last check Alain de Botton (an independent, non-academic scholar) was the top philosopher on Twitter with a whopping 397,121 followers; Daniel Dennett and Peter Singer ranked immediately after (respectively with 46,733 and 40,194 followers).

Regardless of the type of social networking platform (and this goes also for blogs, to some extent), the key lies in engaging one’s audience frequently, which can, of course, be a time consuming — if rewarding — activity. Blogs that publish less than a post per week, or Twitter feeds that are not active almost every day, will likely lose followers, which probably



in part at least accounts for the rising number of collaborative blogging and social networking, as in the case of the highly visible Talking Philosophy blog and corresponding Twitter feed. This latter example also highlights the interconnectedness of virtual platforms: blog posts are publicized via tweets and/or Facebook and Google+ posts, and even the “brick-and-mortar” activities mentioned at the beginning of this section (philosophy cafes, magazines, etc.) benefit from being publicized via social networks. It is in this sense that public philosophy does in fact draw time and resources away from insular academic research.

Consequently, a frequent reaction from colleagues who hear about the above-mentioned public pursuits is along the lines of, “why is anyone wasting her times doing this?,” or “that sort of thing cheapens real philosophy,” or finally, “those are just people who want to make money out of philosophy.” We find all three reactions downright bizarre, and more importantly, highly deleterious to the profession.

Beginning with the third claim: it is not at all clear what exactly is wrong with professionals benefiting financially from public outreach efforts. The days during which philosophy was a pursuit open only to independently wealthy Athenians passed thousands of years ago, fortunately. Our colleagues draw regular salaries from their home universities, after all, and these salaries are in (often large) part justified by their teaching duties, and as we will see, there is no salient difference here.

Concerning the alleged cheapening of real philosophy: it is certainly the case that public outreach — just like teaching — requires simplifications and a less rigorous (one would want to say more creative) approach than the one employed in the service of writing technical papers. But this is true of all disciplines (see our comments above about the effectiveness of science popularizing). Even so, a good number of magazine articles and book chapters put out in the service of public philosophy are rigorous, subtle, and inventive, as they are written by established professionals in the field.

As for why we should bother: we find it shocking that any practicing philosopher would really need to be provided with an explicit answer, but see Section II for our take on it.

All of this does raise an interesting question about public philosophy in general, and the forms discussed so far in particular: what is the relation of public philosophy to the subject’s general study, and can we draw any conclusions about public philosophy’s value from that relation?

#### IV. But is it philosophy? The continuum between teaching and philosophizing

In order to determine whether or not public philosophy is a worthwhile pursuit for philosophers, it would help first to agree on what it is that philosophers do. This entails a definition of “philosophy,” which is a notoriously thorny issue (then again, so is the definition of science, though the problem doesn’t seem to bother scientists themselves too much). Nevertheless, when a journalist interested in the matter recently asked a wide range of professional philosophers to define the field, the responses varied significantly less than one might have imagined: almost all agreed that philosophy should be defined as a method or practice rather than as a particular subject matter or set of concepts.<sup>19</sup> Most agreed that the method involves the exposure of ideas to critical evaluation. It is for similar reasons that John Dewey defined philosophy as a “general theory of education,” since the critical evaluation of any field’s ideas yields progress in that field.<sup>20</sup>

We therefore define philosophy in broad and narrow senses. Broadly speaking, philosophy is any critical, rational reflection and discourse on conceptual connections. This is the sense classically propounded by Aristotle and more recently endorsed by such philosophers as Julian Baggini.<sup>21</sup> In this broad sense, philosophy provides the bedrock upon which other fields of human endeavor are built, as is clear in the various “philosophies of” (e.g., science, mind, religion, art). This “applied” philosophy is derivative of more narrow philosophical discussion and may be pursued by philosophers and non-philosophers alike. In the narrow sense, philosophy is the activity performed normally, if not exclusively, by professional philosophers: critical reflection and discourse on specific, fundamental questions of human interest that cannot be resolved empirically. These topics are generally unclaimed by other disciplines and include issues in ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and the like; even where these topics may be claimed by other disciplines, they remain conceptual and not resolved by practice within those disciplines.

Distinguishing these broad and narrow senses of philosophy has important implications for public philosophy’s perceived and real value. Those colleagues who object to public philosophy because of its supposed irrelevance favor the narrow sense of philosophy: if a debate is not engaged solely by academic philosophers, or by other academics acting in the philosopher’s role, then it is outside the narrow purview of philosophy and consequently a distraction from “real” philosophy. But it is worth noting that the boundary between the broad and narrow senses of philosophy is vague. As we will show below, professional philosophers may productively engage questions outside the traditional philosophical core and non-philosophers may productively contribute to narrowly philosophical debates. It is

for these reasons that we assert that professional philosophers should value public philosophy.

Consider the following taxonomy of philosophical activity. Professional philosophy includes a number of different kinds of social interaction, each (generally) with an expected level of philosophical discourse. We distinguish three primary forms of interaction (four forms overall) and three levels of discourse, related to one another in this manner:

Form of Interaction		Level of Discourse
Professional Philosopher to Layperson		Introductory
Professional Philosopher to Philosophy Student	Teacher to Undergraduate Student	
	Teacher to Graduate Student	Intermediate
Professional Philosopher to Professional Academic		Advanced

The forms of interaction reflect the standard academic progression common to other disciplines as well (we could easily replace “professional philosopher” above with “professional scientist” or any other academic). Professionals in the discipline engage in introductory discourse with laypeople or lower-level undergraduates. As undergraduates continue in the discipline and learn greater sophistication in the subject, the level of discourse becomes intermediate: they understand the basics and begin to make headway into rougher disciplinary waters, but are still finding their proverbial sea legs. This intermediate level of discourse continues into graduate school until students complete their coursework, after which point they are expected to have achieved a subtle, nuanced understanding sufficient for making productive contributions to the discipline. This is (generally) the point at which discourse becomes advanced and students come to be considered as full colleagues.

One important point to draw out of this taxonomy is that no clear line can be drawn between *teaching* philosophy and *performing* philosophy. Another important point is that no one



level of discourse correlates with any single form of interaction. These observations have implications for the value of public philosophy.

If philosophy is, as Dewey suggested, a general theory of education, then it ought to be difficult to distinguish between performing philosophy and merely teaching it. Nevertheless, we might provisionally define teaching as the communication of a field's ideas from a relative expert in that field to a relative novice. This communication proceeds in one direction: the novice gains additional understanding, but the expert does not. By this standard, the professional philosopher teaches laypeople and lower-level undergraduates. As undergraduates become more sophisticated, and as they enter graduate school, interactions between teacher and student are still largely skewed towards the benefit of one side (i.e., the student), but the students' more sophisticated responses may expose the teacher's ideas to critical evaluation. There are therefore aspects of actual performance of philosophy in these interactions and the interactions cannot neatly be classified as either teaching or performance of philosophy. Finally, interactions between professional philosophers and upper-level graduate students or other professional academics take place between peers: both parties can expect to profit from the interaction, and the exchange of ideas proceeds equally in both directions. This is clearly performance rather than teaching. The transition between teaching and performance of philosophy is therefore vague.

This vagueness between philosophical teaching and performance should be expected from the lack of correlation between interaction type and level of discourse. By the expert's lights, the level of discourse during teaching interactions is introductory. Advanced discourse, as with full colleagues and upper-level graduate students, requires performance rather than teaching. But intermediate discourse has characteristics in common with both other levels. Interactions between professional philosophers and upper-level undergraduates or lower-level graduate students are indisputably student-teacher interactions, but students at this point are expected to engage in some level of performance themselves. Somewhere in the transition from undergraduate education to graduate school, interactions gradually lose aspects of teaching and acquire aspects of philosophical performance; this vague transitional area is the level of intermediate discourse.

Our proposed taxonomy has implications for the claim that public philosophy is a waste of the professional philosopher's time. Take for granted the claim that advanced discourse is worth the professional's time; after all, this is the level at which professional research is done. Professional philosophers interact with graduate students at an advanced level of discourse; advanced discourse bridges professional-professional and professional-student interactions. We may conclude that no one kind of interaction is the only one worth a

professional philosopher's attention. If advanced discourse is the level at which a professional philosopher's ideas are exposed to critical, rational evaluation, then we must also admit that intermediate discourse — which includes aspects of advanced discourse, as discussed above — is a worthwhile pursuit for the professional philosopher. The upshot is that professional philosophers ought to engage in multiple different sorts of interactions at multiple levels of discourse. One cannot fairly argue, then, that public philosophy is somehow below the professional philosopher's concern simply because it is not an interaction between professional academics, or because it is not done at an advanced level of discourse.

Of course, this raises the question of where in our taxonomy one should place public philosophy. The answer, we think, is both surprising and different from, say, what one would obtain in the sciences. If we were talking about physics, or biology, we would probably categorize interactions with the general public as those between professionals and laypeople, or perhaps between professionals and undergraduate students (at best). Most members of the public do not have anything like a graduate level understanding of science, and most importantly are in no position (valiant amateurish efforts notwithstanding) to actually participate in the advancement of science. Even so-called "citizen scientist" initiatives<sup>22</sup> necessarily limit the contribution of non-professionals to data collection and perhaps a minimum of analysis, while the heavy duty conceptual work is done by professional scientists.

The case of philosophy, we argue, is very different. Naturally, some laypeople will have a grasp of narrowly philosophical concepts that is less firm than that of an undergraduate student. But the practice of philosophy *per se* does not depend on expertise in any particular subject matter, as discussed above. In the broad sense, philosophy consists in the critical, rational evaluation of ideas; although their discipline-specific concerns define philosophy in the narrow sense, professional philosophers can and often do engage more broadly philosophical topics — especially when interacting with non-professionals. Since philosophy in the broad sense is dependent on philosophy in the narrow sense, broad philosophical discussions may cover narrowly philosophical ground, and so non-professionals may likewise engage narrowly philosophical topics. Our experience with blogging, Meetups, social networking and the like has provided us with plenty of examples of non-professionals who are very well read even in some aspects of the narrow philosophical literature (depending on their interest), and who can argue points and further discussions almost on a par with professional philosophers. The charge that public philosophy is a distraction from narrowly philosophical concerns therefore fails because all philosophy has the potential to be public philosophy.

Similar considerations show that public philosophy is not less valuable to philosophers than other forms of philosophy. Narrowly philosophical interactions with members of the public include some aspects of teaching, but clearly take place at an intermediate level of discourse (at least). In those cases, therefore, doing public philosophy is performing actual philosophy (or close to it), and not merely teaching. If it is worth the professional philosopher's time to teach graduate students — another form of interaction that includes aspects of teaching and performance — then surely it must also be worth the professional philosopher's time to participate in public philosophy.

We do not mean to imply that public philosophy would not be valuable to philosophers if it did not involve at least an intermediate level of discourse. To the contrary: we would consider public philosophy worth the effort even if it were exclusively a “mere” teaching interaction with the general public about philosophy, although of course that is a more difficult case to make to the skeptics. Academics often treat interactions at the introductory level of discourse as incidental at best. One “perk” of securing a tenure-track job is supposed to be a greater level of freedom from obligations to teach introductory-level courses; courses at that level of discourse are increasingly left to graduate-level adjunct instructors, few of whom are given formal training in teaching as part of their graduate education.<sup>23 24</sup> Those who dismiss introductory-level teaching generally are not likely to value introductory-level public philosophy.

This attitude has contributed to philosophy's public relations problem. Recent research indicates that lower-level undergraduates are more likely to pursue higher-level study in humanities disciplines when their introductory-level courses are taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty.<sup>25</sup> Empirically, then, professional philosophers — who, as noted in section I, find their discipline under threat of extinction — would benefit from a less dismissive attitude towards introductory-level teaching: successful introductory-level discourse makes advanced-level discourse possible. Even if one does not adopt the view that introductory-level teaching is valuable for its own sake (as we do), she must admit that it is valuable towards the security of higher-level discourse. As noted above: philosophy in the broad sense, which is more easily communicated to the layperson, depends on philosophy in the narrow sense. Professional philosophers do value teaching philosophy in the narrow sense to graduates and upper-level undergraduates. Since introductory instruction makes those more valued forms of teaching possible—by securing departmental resources, by recruiting new students, and by giving students tools for success at higher levels of discourse — it follows that professional philosophers ought to value teaching philosophy in the broad sense. Introductory-level interactions, including both undergraduate teaching and public philosophy, are therefore valuable to the professional philosopher.

Of course, some of the settings for public philosophy described in the previous section lend themselves better than others to the performance of philosophy. Accordingly, professional philosophers interested in having their narrowly philosophical ideas challenged from a fresh perspective would do well to concentrate on blogging, while philosophers more inclined to devote their time to public appreciation of philosophy, in both the broad and narrow senses, will be more efficacious by contributing to book chapters or hosting meetups and philosophy cafes. This brings us to the last question we would like to briefly discuss in this paper: if public philosophy is valuable for professional philosophers, then what should be done to further the idea of public philosophy among academic professionals?

## V. What should be done about public philosophy?

We mentioned above that beginning in the 1990s a number of professional science societies have started to take much more seriously the idea of supporting and encouraging public outreach efforts by their members. The American Philosophical Association, however, is definitely behind the curve on this count. While the APA website lists resources for academics and graduate students, the focus is largely on professional philosophy or on teaching.

Yet, even the APA has recently begun to pay attention. In 2011 it started a “Public Philosophy Op-Ed contest” sponsored by their committee on public philosophy. That year five entries were given the award (a not exactly impressive \$100 each): James Stacey Taylor for “Want to Save Lives? Allow Bone Marrow Donors to be Paid” (Los Angeles Times), David Kyle Johnson for “Watson in Philosophical Jeopardy” (Psychology Today), José-Antonio Orosco for “Tuition Bill the Decent Option” (Corvallis Gazette-Times), Louise M. Antony for “Goodness Minus God” (New York Times), and Todd Edwin Jones for “Budgetary Hemlock” (Boston Review). Unfortunately, as of the time of this writing (late 2013) no additional competition has been announced, even though the web site states that the public philosophy prizes will be given annually. Clearly, much more can (and should, for the reasons given above) be done.

There are a number of other steps that the APA and similar societies throughout the world (or even individual academic departments) could take in this respect. To begin with, a dedicated section of the web site could be devoted explicitly to public philosophy to send the message to their members that the issue is important. Perhaps the most important move would be to advise the academic community that public outreach ought to be considered as one of the criteria for granting tenure and/or promotion, alongside the traditional criteria of scholarship, teaching and university service. There is no reason why this additional criterion

cannot be quantified and standardized just like the other three are, although of course it would take some discussion and eventual consensus on the best ways to do it. It is our perception that the academic philosophical culture is changing anyway, with younger colleagues increasingly involved in blogging, writing for the public, and other outreach efforts. But it would certainly speed things up if professional societies and university administrations would send a clear message encouraging such activities, as opposed to just tolerating or even implicitly obstructing them.

A perhaps more ambitious, but likely vital for the profession, effort could go into encouraging fundraising aimed at the establishment of professional chairs for the public understanding of philosophy, analogous to the Simonyi Professorship for Public Understanding of Science currently existing at Oxford University. One such chair actually exists, since 2009, at the University of Warwick (UK), and is currently held by Professor Angela Hobbs. This shows the feasibility of such endeavors, and we maintain that the community ought to strive so that this will soon become a much more common feature of the academic landscape.

Certainly additional initiatives can be thought of and implemented in order to make public philosophy a standard component of what professional philosophers do, and this paper is meant only as a partial contribution to the ongoing conversation. We would like to remind our colleagues that public philosophy is not just good for the profession's PR (which is badly needed anyway!), but is a way to bring public intellectualism back to the forefront of societal discussions concerning a broad range of issues on which philosophers can knowledgeably comment. Moreover, let us not forget that the academy as such largely exists because of the public purse (even private universities increasingly depend on public research grants to thrive), and that as the beneficiaries of such contribution it is a moral imperative for us to give something back to the public.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Redding, P., "Philosophy is not a 'ridiculous' pursuit. It is worth funding." *The Guardian*, 16 September 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Weinberg, S. (1992) "Against philosophy." In: *Dreams Of A Final Theory. The Search For The Fundamental Laws Of Nature*. Pantheon, pp. 166-190; for criticism, see Pigliucci, M. (2008) *The borderlands*



---

between science and philosophy: an introduction. *Quarterly Review of Biology* 83:7-15.

<sup>3</sup> Hawking, S. & Mlodinow, L. (2010) *The Grand Design*. Bantam; for a commentary see: Norris, C., "Hawking contra philosophy." *Philosophy Now*, Sep/Oct 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Merritt, K.L. (2010) Anti-intellectualism. In: R. Chapman (ed.), *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*. M.E. Sharpe, pp. 27-28.

<sup>5</sup> Radder, H. (ed.) (2010) *The Commodification of Academic Research: Science and the Modern University*. University of Pittsburgh Press; Wilson, R., "For-profit colleges change higher education's landscape." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 February 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Kitcher, P. (2011) "Philosophy Inside Out." *Metaphilosophy* 42 (3) pp. 248-260.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2011.01684.x>

<sup>7</sup> E.g.: Wolff, J., "Why is Middlesex University philosophy department closing?" *The Guardian*, 17 May 2010; McIntyre, L. "Making philosophy matter—or else." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 December 2011.

<sup>8</sup> E.g.: Hu, W., "In a new generation of college students, many opt for the life examined." *The New York Times*, 6 April 2008; Needleman, S.E., "Doing the math to find the good jobs." *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 January 2009; Stewart, M., "The management myth." *The Atlantic*, 1 June 2006; Cole, D., "Learn philosophy." *US News & World Report*, 18 December 2008; "Philosophy students 'a happy lot.'" *BBC News*, 8 September 2005; Shepherd, J., "I think, therefore I earn." *The Guardian*, 19 November 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Howard, D.A., "Einstein's Philosophy of Science," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/einstein-philscience/>.

<sup>10</sup> A Google search of academic websites for the phrase "why study philosophy" yields 1.4 million results.

<sup>11</sup> See supra note 6.

<sup>12</sup> A classic example is the story of astronomer Carl Sagan, turned down by the National Academy of Sciences: Benford, G., "A tribute to Carl Sagan: popular & pilloried," *Skeptic* 13(1), 2007.

<sup>13</sup> For a brief guide to the value of philosophy and how to explain it to the public, see: Pigliucci, M. (2013) *The Relevance of Philosophy*. *RationallySpeaking.org*, available at Amazon.com

<sup>14</sup> With all due respect to the famous title by Bertrand Russell in that category, which is still highly readable today, and which was actually partially responsible for getting each of us (independently) into philosophy to begin with.

<sup>15</sup> In Steiff, J. (2011). *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*.

<sup>16</sup> In Irwin, W. (2011). *Green Lantern and Philosophy: No Evil Shall Escape This Book*. J. Dryden and M.D.

---

White (Eds.). Wiley.com.

<sup>17</sup> In Irwin, W. (2012). *The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy: Rock, Paper, Scissors, Aristotle, Locke*. D. Kowalski (Ed.). Wiley. com.

<sup>18</sup> In Irwin, W. (2013). *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do*. M. D. White (Ed.). Wiley. com.

<sup>19</sup> See: Popova, M. (2012) What is Philosophy? An Omnibus of Definitions from Prominent Philosophers. Brain Pickings web site.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey, J. (2004). *Democracy and Education*. Courier Dover Publications.

<sup>21</sup> Baggin, J. (2006). *The Pig that Wants to be Eaten: 100 Experiments for the Armchair Philosopher*. Penguin.com.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance: “Citizen Science” on the *Scientific American* web site.

<sup>23</sup> Murphy Nutting, M. (2003). Part-Time Faculty: Why Should We Care? *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2003(123), 33-39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/he.118>

<sup>24</sup> Ehrenberg, R. G., & Zhang, L. (2005). Do tenured and tenure-track faculty matter? *Journal of Human Resources*, 40(3), 647-659.

<sup>25</sup> Bettinger, E., & Long, B. T. (2004). *Do college instructors matter? The effects of adjuncts and graduate assistants on students' interests and success* (No. w10370). National Bureau of Economic Research.